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Eduardo Frei Montalva

EDUARDO FREI was widely regarded as the "last best hope" for Latin democracy during the years 1964-70, when he was president of Chile. It was a pardonable exaggeration. The Cuban revolution had imparted a double sense that the hemisphere was moving leftward and that the United States had a major interest in checking the flow. Chile then enjoyed a reputation as the premier Latin democracy, and Eduardo Frei was seen, in Chile and in the United States, as the sort of able, principled democratic reformer who could erect a "firebreak" on the left and keep the radicals on the other side.

Founder of his country's Christian Democratic Party, Mr. Frei had pronounced himself "staggered by the differences in economic strata" in Chile. He took office in 1964 with the only absolute majority any Chilean presidential candidate has enjoyed. Whether he knew of the secret funds that, it turned out later, the CIA put into his campaign was never established. Whether he needed such support was dubious. In any event, with a good deal of public American backing, he proclaimed a "revolution in

liberty" entailing agrarian reform, nationalization of copper mines and income redistribution. He was serious, but by the time he finished his single constitutionally allowable six-year term, he had whetted popular appetites for considerably more progress than he had been able to deliver.

Marxist Salvador Allende received a plurality of the popular vote in 1970, and on the right in Chile there were elements opposed to letting him take office. At various times some of those elements had received CIA encouragement, but, with Mr. Frei lending his prestige to a constitutional succession, Mr. Allende was seated. Within barely a year, Chile was exploding into class war. Mr. Frei ran for the Senate in 1973 to continue the fight by parliamentary means, but even he could not slow the disintegration. In September, the generals made a coup whose dark result Mr. Frei bravely contested until he died at age 70 in Santiago last Friday. He was a man of true honor, which is much more than can be said for any of the people who have ruled Chile, and abused Chile, since his time.